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Women in Canada

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Women in Canada

*Prepared by the Women's Bureau,
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Canada*

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Since the Second World War, advances in medicine and technology, the development of mass communications, growing urbanization and wider educational opportunities have had an important effect on the lives of Canadian men and women.

Women represent about 50.3 per cent of the population of Canada, which is approximately 23,482,600.

Women in rural and urban areas

Canada covers an area of over 9.9 million square kilometres, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west and, in the north, extending as far as the Arctic Ocean. This vast region includes mountains and wooded areas, broad plains where cereals are the main crop, areas that are highly industrialized and others that are almost uninhabited.

Most of Canada's population lives in a corridor 160 to 320 kilometres wide along its southern border. Five hundred kilometres to the north are isolated centres, most of whose inhabitants are engaged in mining, lumbering or energy development.

On the whole, the social and material conditions of rural women are similar to those of city women. Nearly all Canadian families have electricity, run-

ning water, radio, telephone, television, an electric or gas stove and a refrigerator. About three-quarters have a car and about two-thirds own their own homes.

In addition, now that new highways and improved means of transportation have made travel easier, contact between the country and the city is more frequent than in the past and, thanks to radio and television, women in rural areas are much less isolated than before, except in very remote regions.

Education

For several decades it has been compulsory for boys and girls to attend primary and secondary school until the age of 15 or 16, depending on the province in which they live. However, a considerable increase in the number of women entering university has been observed in recent years. In 1973, women received 39.8 per cent of all bachelor degrees granted in Canada. In 1977 this figure rose to 47.7 per cent. During the same period, the percentage of women granted master's degrees increased from 26.8 per cent to 31.3 per cent. At the doctoral level, the percentage of women graduates increased from 11.2 per cent to 17.9 per cent.

In addition to the increase in the number of women graduating with

degrees and diplomas from institutions of higher learning, there has also been a change in the kinds of courses women enrol in at post-secondary institutions. Though most women still enter disciplines customarily reserved for them (in 1977, 84.7 per cent of the degrees, diplomas and certificates awarded to women at the master's level were in education, the social sciences, the humanities and related areas), the number of women entering the professions usually regarded as masculine is increasing.

Thus, between 1973 and 1977, the number of women among those receiving their first professional degrees in medicine increased from 17.8 per cent to 27.7 per cent, in law from 13.8 per cent to 27.5 per cent, in optometry from 14.3 per cent to 27.5 per cent, in dentistry from 6.7 per cent to 8.7 per cent and in veterinary medicine from 10.8 per cent to 30 per cent.

One of the newer developments in Canadian education, the importance of which is still increasing, is continuing education, sometimes called adult education. This consists of post-secondary classes in the evening or during the summer, or correspondence courses, offered by a number of institutions, in a wide variety of subjects. This program enables men and women who find it difficult to enrol in full-time courses because of family or professional responsibilities to take courses

with the aim of obtaining a diploma or certificate or simply because they are interested in the subject. In 1977, 60.4 per cent of the part-time students at the bachelor's level and 33 per cent of those at the graduate level were women.

Work

The most radical changes in the position of women in Canada have occurred in the working world. Between 1968 and 1978, the number of women in the labour force increased by 63 per cent.

At present, over four million Canadian women are employed. Of these, 60.3 per cent are married. Women represent 38.9 per cent of Canada's labour force, and 58.9 per cent of all women over the age of 25 years work.

There are numerous reasons for the greater number of women entering the job market. Automation has been a major factor, lightening household chores and reducing the amount of time spent on them and, in industry, decreasing the importance of physical strength in a large number of occupations, thereby opening them to women in general. As a result, the notion, once generally accepted, that there are certain jobs suitable for men and others suitable for women is no longer as widely held, particularly since, during the two world wars, women demonstrated their skills in a great many

tasks previously considered exclusively masculine. But the main reason has proven to be economic.

The traditional view of the role of women has also changed. Ten or 20 years ago, most women gave up their jobs when they married or had their first child, and, with the occasional exception, did not re-enter the job market. Today a large number of mothers continue to work because they are the sole provider for their family or because they find one salary insufficient to meet the rising cost of living. Another growing group of women deliberately choose not to have children at all and to pursue a career.

Working conditions

On the whole, labour legislation, which, except where federal employees are concerned, comes under provincial jurisdiction, applies to men and women equally in the areas of minimum wage, maximum hours, unemployment insurance, days of rest, holidays, annual vacations and workmen's compensation.

Also, certain protective provisions in labour legislation applying only to women are being abolished throughout the country. For example, women may now work underground in mines in various jurisdictions. However, certain provincial laws still impose standards of safety and health for women only. Under most laws on workmen's compensation, the widow of an employee

killed on the job is entitled to an allowance and a pension regardless of her financial situation but a widower is entitled to a pension only if he is an invalid.

Although the working woman's contribution to the economy is generally recognized, the principle of equal pay for work of equal value is not yet universally applied. In a number of occupations, women are less well paid than men for the same job or one of comparable importance. This situation is improving as a result of legislative action. In July 1977, the Canadian Government became one of the first in the world to implement legislation requiring its employers to pay men and women equally for work of equal value. This is the strongest legislation in this domain, although all the provincial and territorial governments have laws specifically prohibiting pay discrimination based on sex for similar or comparable work performed for the same employer.

All ten provinces, the two territories and the Federal Government have enacted laws prohibiting discrimination on grounds of sex in employment or conditions of employment. In the light of the increased number of women in higher education and on the labour market, and of the decline in the popular belief that certain jobs are by their nature suited to women exclusively or to men exclusively, such legislative measures will undoubtedly lead to

changes in the "employment profile" of women in the labour force. In 1978 women represented 76.9 per cent of all clerical workers, 53.8 per cent of all employees in personal service occupations and the majority of teachers in primary and secondary schools.

One of the main problems facing working mothers is the care of their children. There has consequently been a growing interest in recent years in day-care centres. The need for these is becoming increasingly acute (most mothers who work outside the home do so for economic reasons), and the numerous studies on the subject indicate that not only are well-organized pre-school programs not harmful to the child but they often contribute to his or her development. In Canada, as in most industrialized countries, it is very difficult to find domestic help, the demand far exceeding the supply.

There are now 2,050 registered day-care facilities in Canada, most of them for children between the ages of two and six, and this number is expected to increase considerably. Day-care centres come under the jurisdiction of the provincial governments, which in some cases delegate this responsibility to municipal authorities. Through the Canada Assistance Plan, the Federal Government covers part of the cost to the provinces by setting up day-care

services for children from low-income families, whose financial contribution is determined by earnings.

Social security

Women are eligible for all federal and provincial social-security programs. They enjoy the benefits of provincial medical and hospital insurance plans, which are financed in part by the Federal Government and are universal in application. They are also eligible for old-age security pensions payable to anyone 65 or over who meets the residence requirements, and for a guaranteed-income supplement paid to pensioners who have little or no income other than the pension.

In addition, family allowances, payable for every child under 18 years of age still being supported, are paid monthly, usually to the mother.

The only exception is the Canada Pension Plan, in which only persons between the ages of 18 and 65 earning more than a specified annual amount as an employee or a self-employed worker may participate. This means that women who are not part of the labour force are excluded from the Plan. However, the wife of a contributor is entitled on his death to a widow's pension, which varies according to her age and whether or not she has dependent children.

Women who receive widows' pensions may have contributed to the Canada Pension Plan themselves and consequently may be entitled to retirement or disability pensions in their own right. However, the widower whose deceased wife contributed to the Plan could receive a pension only if he was wholly or substantially dependent on her for financial support at the time of her death. But under an amendment to the Plan, passed in November 1974, the widower of a contributor has the same rights as the widow of a contributor.

Employers under federal and all but one provincial jurisdiction are required to grant maternity leave of varying duration but averaging 17 weeks. The qualifying periods vary also. One province requires previous employment with the same employer for 20 weeks. In six provinces and federally, 12 months is required, and in two provinces, qualifying periods have been abolished. The Federal Government and four provinces have passed legislation prohibiting dismissals or lay-offs for reasons of pregnancy.

Since 1971, the federal program of unemployment insurance, which covers all Canadian employees, men and women, has provided for the payment of benefits for a woman on maternity leave for a period of 15

weeks, subject to a two-week waiting period.

Citizenship

The Canadian Citizenship Act imposes no disabilities on the married woman, which means that she neither acquires nor loses Canadian citizenship by marriage. A female alien who marries a Canadian citizen and has been legally admitted to Canada may obtain Canadian citizenship after living in Canada for only one year, instead of the three years normally required. On the other hand, a married Canadian woman cannot pass on her citizenship to a child born to her abroad. However, an amendment recently introduced in the House of Commons provides for equal rights, conditions and privileges for all Canadians without distinction on grounds of sex.

Legal Rights

Single women have the same legal rights as men in every part of Canada.

Under British common law and the Quebec Civil Code, a married woman's domicile, upon her marrying and as a result of her new situation, is the same as her husband's. Since 1968, however, when the new Divorce Act was passed, a married woman has, in order to permit her to file a petition for

divorce, been considered as having a domicile separate from that of her husband.

In every province except Quebec the civil law is based on the British common law. A married woman has full legal capacity to own, purchase and transfer her own property, to enter into contracts and to dispose of her possessions in a will, and she and her husband have equal rights and obligations with respect to the care and custody of their children.

In Quebec, where civil rights are governed by the province's Civil Code, the legal rights of a married woman were different from those of married women in other provinces. As a result of the Act Respecting the Legal Capacity of Married Women, passed in 1964, and the establishment of partnership of acquests under the Act Respecting Matrimonial Regimes, in force since 1970, married women in Quebec have acquired legal status similar to that of women in other parts of Canada.

Politics

Canadian women were first given the right to vote in 1916 in the provinces of Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan. This example was soon followed

in the other provinces, with the exception of Quebec, where women did not obtain the right to vote until 1940.

Women obtained the right to be appointed to the Senate following a decision by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England in 1929.

Canada now has 11 women in the 104-member Senate, 21 women members and six women ministers in provincial legislative assemblies, and 9 women members and 1 woman minister in the Federal Parliament.

Women's organizations

There are many women's organizations in Canada involved in public-service activities or activities of particular interest to women. In addition to these volunteer organizations, there are several created by the federal and provincial governments.

In 1954 the Federal Government set up the Women's Bureau, a division of the Department of Labour, and assigned it the tasks of studying the status of women in the Canadian labour force, preparing reports on this subject, making known the conditions encountered by working women, informing the public about legislation passed to combat discrimination against women, and promoting the acceptance of women in

all sectors and at all levels of the labour force. Three provinces and one territory have established similar bureaus.

The creation in 1967 of a Royal Commission to inquire into the status of Canadian women marked a major step in bringing to light the condition of women in Canada. In 1970, the Commission published a report containing 167 recommendations, some aimed at the Federal Government and others aimed at provincial and municipal authorities. To date only 24 recommendations within federal jurisdiction have not been acted upon.

In 1973, the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women was created to bring before government and the public matters of interest and concern to women. A minister was given the responsibility for the Status of Women in the Federal Government and in several provincial governments which also have advisory councils. The Province of Quebec now has a Ministry on the Status of Women, with Madame Lise Payette as its first minister.

Many other organizations, public, para-public and private, take an active

interest in the status of women in Canada and serve as lobby groups and beacons on the matter.

Apart from organizations such as these specifically designed to help improve the status of women at both the federal and provincial levels of jurisdiction, nine provinces and the Federal Government have established Human Rights Commissions responsible, among other duties, for promoting the principle of equal opportunities for all, including women.



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